DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 527 CS 206 105

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TITLE Writing Anxiety and Discrimination in Freshman Composition.
PUB DATE Feb 80
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two Year College (15th, Birmingham, AL, February 21-23, 1980). Some pages may not reproduce clearly.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anxiety: College English: College Freshmen: Higher Education: *Student Evaluation: *Teacher Attitudes: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Apprehension: *Writing Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that freshman composition teachers often discriminate against students by giving better grades to longer papers or to papers that are clean and legible. Studies have also shown that teachers consider females to be more capable at verbal skills and to have neater handwriting. Since teachers expect low writing anxiety in females and high writing anxiety in males, they tend to downgrade high-anxiety females and low-anxiety males. There are several ways teachers can identify students with writing anxiety to eliminate possible discrimination. If a student's papers are nonexistent or always tardy, this may indicate writing anxiety caused by lifestyles of procrastination or perfectionism. The student whose paper is short but fairly good mechanically may have an aesthetic fear of the blank page or difficulty getting an essay started. A short paper with poor mechanics might have been written by a student with a lack of basic skills, which can be improved through remedial instruction. A student with no writing anxiety may produce a hastily written first draft, but realistic grading will create an anxiety level sufficient for better writing. A paper that is long and neat, but does not communicate might indicate a fear of structure and ordering of thoughts, a fear that can be reduced by a better understanding of the writing process. (HTH)

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WRITING ANXIETY AND DISCRIMINATION IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

by

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Presented at
Southeast Regional Conference
English in the Two Year College
Birmingham, Alabama
February, 1980

Teachers familiar with educational research know that they are prone to discriminating among their students. We have long known that we like those who are from our socio-economic background and those who are approximately equal to our own IQ (neither smarter, or dumber). We are also reminded that we tend to approve of the neat, clean, attentive student. Recent research warns us that we are more comfortable with the left brain linear student, discriminating against the right brain wholistic student.

Therefore, it is with some reluctance that I proceed today to add another student to your roster of potential discrimination: the student with Writing Anxiety.

Writing Anxiety has been defined variously: by Daly and Miller as a specific case of general communication apprehension in real or imagined communication situations;[1] by Lynn Bloom as analogous to Math Anxiety, a cluster of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors which keep a person from writing at all, or with less efficiency and effectiveness than he or she might do otherwise;[2] and by this author as a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write.[3]

To help identify students with Writing Anxiety, we have at least two well documented tests: the Daly-Miller Apprehension Test standardized in 1975[4] and the Thompson Writing Attitude Survey documented in 1978.[5] Both tests are Likert scales listing statements of writing attitudes. Daly-Miller have reported that their test items were modeled after those on similar measures of communication apprehension. This author reported that the Thompson Survey items were developed from hundreds of statements reported by teachers and students during attitude discussion sessions. In these sessions, teachers and students downplayed the evaluation process, while worrying more about the personal committment inherent in the writing process. Therefore, while the Daly-Miller scale leans towards fear of evaluation (1/3 of 26 items), the Thompson Survey leans towards statements describing the writer's feelings about the writing process and its consequences (2/3 of 30 items).

At the beginning of each quarter I administer the Thompson Writing Attitude Survey to all my Freshman Composition students. Using the standardized range of 124-62, I note for attention all students whose scores mark them at either extreme of the range; students who have too much or too little anxiety often produce poor papers. When the students have completed their diagnostic writing assignment in class during the first week of class, I match poor papers against writing anxiety scores, and ask these students to private

office conferences. I quickly differenciate those whose low writing anxiety scores will be taken care of by the usual progression of college experience. There remains those whose writing scores and papers mark them for individual instruction.

Let us direct our attention now to one such student. I present to you two papers from one student written during the first two weeks of class. Take a quick glance at each one, just as I did, as they each turned up in my pile of papers when I had no identification with students. Try not to read either one.

Paper #1: In-Class Writing Assignment

Topic: "Previous English Class That I have Experienced to This Date."

Time: 50 minutes

In examining previous English classes I recall always evaluating studies taught and those which I learned. Writing assignment number one is not only an evaluation of past classes but an evaluation of myself.

I recently graduated from Groveton High School in Jasper County. The necessary credits to graduate were four year of English and the classes were chosen by the student. I who seriously ~~(illegible)~~ after writing chose all reading courses till my senior year. The classes were all informative as to the writing and analysis of well known authors. The reading classes also helped me design my own style and technique

of writing. Then, during my senior year I elected a writing course. The course was explicit in certain forms of writing — such as: plays, descriptions poetry etc..... The class was disappointing in a way because it did not delve as far into writing as I desired. English 111 has now been chosen for this task.

My fall quarter of my first year was spent at the Alexandria campus of N.V.C.C.. Petrified of college level writing I attended a pre-requisit course. The course was a study of basic grammar. It was informative, and made me use previous aquired skills which I never knew existed.

A complete look at my previous English courses makes me once again feel unadignate to be placed in a composition course. The feeling though is not a complete one. I intend to over powerthe the feeling with new aquired knowledge and skills.

Paper #2: Out of Class Writing Assignment

Topic: Any topic you wish

(Students were instructed to use the brainstorming method of discovering material (practiced in class prior to assignment) and from that to write a short essay about 200 words on their topic.)

Why is music a language universally understood and enjoyed is a quite simple issue. Today in the United States as well as many other countries music is a way of life. It has been built from many years of tradition. It is a language which can not be misinterpretted; clefs, notes, melodies and harmonies are all comprehended the same. Because of its easy and unmistakable interpretation it is common to hear an American

orchestra playing a piece of Russian composed music or vice-versa. This gives the music audience a larger variety, creating more devoted fans. The listeners then may choose from an extremely large variety of music. With a large variety of music exposed, people select their own choice making music a true form of recreation or just plain enjoyment.

Essay #1 appeared in my pile of 125 first week essays, all blind, because the students were new to me. I unconsciously made some of the same decisions you have just made: I guessed that the writer was a young female, probably a good student, and probably a good writer. The rounded, smooth writing had an innocent air of youth about it. The flowing handwriting and the neat, clean paper indicated a woman writer. All of the above indicated to me that maybe this was a good student, though my years of experience also warned me that this might be one of those "cute" 18 year olds. However, the neatness, the good writing accompanying the length, and the paragraphing, led me to believe that here was not only a good student but a good writer.

If you guessed with me that the writer was a young female who is a good student, you would be right. Perhaps,

therefore you show your potential for discriminating.

Research has shown several things about discrimination that composition teachers show towards students. In holistic grading studies, for example, it has been shown that teachers consistently give higher grades to papers evidencing organization principles such as paragraphing. And students have known since third grade that teachers usually give better grades to a long paper (hence all the attempts at "snow jobs"). Can any of us doubt that we silently approve the neat readable paper, or can we truly assert that we've never downgraded the paper presented in an unintelligible scrawl (especially if we happen to hit that paper at 2:00 a.m. during a tedious grading session).

Then of course we deal with sexist discrimination, and we each have to search ourselves on that. Traditionally, females have been thought more capable at verbal skills, and research as verified tradition. Females are also thought, or taught, to be neater, to take greater pride in handwriting; so these expectations are built into our pre-judgment.

At any rate, we know that we do, with no conscious malice, discriminate on several aspects against our students. So here comes one more aspect of which to be wary: writing anxiety. Research shows that teachers tend to evaluate the

student with high writing anxiety less positively than the student with low writing anxiety. This effect is moderated by an interaction between anxiety and sex which reflects teachers' proclivity to downgrade students who fail to fit their expectations. And since teachers expect low writing anxiety in females and high writing anxiety in males, they downgrade high anxiety females and low anxiety males.[6]

Surely we all want to identify sources of possible discrimination. How can we quickly recognize from their essays, those students against whom we might discriminate because of writing anxiety. If you look at some papers (in your mind's eye, please), we can begin to match effects with cause.

* IF THE PAPER IS NON-EXISTENT, OR ALWAYS TARDY.

The writing anxiety may be caused by certain life styles such as procrastination, or perfectionism. The student may have poor personal habits which reflect in his/her study habits. Such a student may benefit from some private counseling through the counseling department, or workshops on such habits (on our campus these are also given periodically through the counseling department).

Such avoidance of writing could also be the effect of misinformation about the difficulty all writers experience. The teacher should provide information about professional writers' agony about their writing. Student writers often do not know that "Writing is Hell," (William Styron, author of Confessions of Nat Turner).

The perfectionist is rarely happy with what he/she writes because the written word has a way of getting away from him, causing great anxiety. Such a person, therefore, is often helped by peer group activity, writing and critiquing in common. Seeing others labor with similar difficulty may ease his mind. Perfectionists also need to know that all writing can be improved, that no piece of writing is ever finished, but at some time writers must stop and hand their writing to an audience.

* IF THE PAPER IS FAIRLY GOOD MECHANICALLY, BUT SHORT

The writing anxiety may come from the simple aesthetic fear of the blank page. I ask students to violate the page immediately by writing the date, their name or something on it. However, students who exhibit acceptable writing skills in short papers often will tell the instructor that they don't know how to start. Exercises in invention techniques: brainstorming, free-writing, the 5 w's, Aristotle's topics, questioning, often are eye-openers to such students.

* IF THE PAPER IS SHORT AND THE MECHANICS ARE POOR

The writing anxiety is probably caused by the student's lack of skills. Anxiety should decline with remedial instruction in grammar, usage, mechanics etc.

* IF THE PAPER IS OBVIOUSLY A HASTILY WRITTEN FIRST DRAFT

The writing anxiety may be non-existent. This student, if confronted by the grades of a realistic critic, should show an increase in anxiety to a level sufficient for a better product.

* IF THE PAPER IS LONG, LOOKS GOOD, BUT DOESN'T COMMUNICATE

The writing anxiety could be caused by a fear of structuring and ordering thoughts. A paper written under such constraints is laborious. It may exhibit intense vocabulary, long rambling sentences, and complex punctuation, but the words are slightly out of synch, the sentences are strained, and the whole doesn't connect with reality. This is the student who benefits most from understanding the writing process.

Denise, the student who wrote the paper I have just given you, suffered from the last type of writing anxiety. Though she was a young female, good student, she was not a good writer, a fact you will recognize as soon as you read the first sentence of the first paper. Denise is in her early 20's, a typical community college student who has been

out of school for a few years and is returning, an attractive, gregarious, seemingly confident young woman. I think that if I had not been aware of her writing anxiety, I might quickly (in my crowded classes) have pegged her as lazy, or hostile. She certainly violated my expectations by being a high-anxiety female. But in many interviews with her, I discovered that she had no trouble with content, or little trouble getting started. She confessed great anxiety about making decisions, staying on one topic once chosen, or organizing the wealth of material she could easily discover. Though she benefited greatly from the usual class exercises on organization, in interviews she benefited primarily from being reminded to forget her "inner critic," to resist the editing process until she had written, to underline key terms in the thesis statements she wrote easily. It did take time, both hers and mine, but she was rewarded by a "B" grade at the end of the quarter.

Recognizing the student with writing anxiety doesn't require radically different methods of teaching from an instructor. But such recognition helps the teacher to better help the student.

FOOTNOTES

[1]John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English 10(Winter, 1975): 243.

[2]Lynn Z. Bloom and Martin Bloom, "An Empirical Study of Writing Anxiety: Its Manifestations and Reduction," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, 1978.

[3]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation of a Language Study Approach to a College Course in Freshman Composition" (PH.D. dissertation, The American University, 1978) p. 8.

[4]Daly and Miller, pp. 242-49.

[5]Thompson, pp. 68-71.

[6]John A. Daly, "Writing Apprehension in the Classroom: Teacher Role Expectancies of the Apprehensive Writer," Research in the Teaching of English 13(1979): 37-44.